

## ***PALMETTO STARS***

Palmetto STARS is a system through which the quality of childcare and early education programs will be rated in South Carolina. Childcare centers that are licensed by the SC Department of Social Services (SCDSS) may voluntarily choose to participate in Palmetto STARS. Public 4 year-old kindergarten programs (4-K) will be required to participate by the State Department of Education (SDE). Palmetto STARS for home-based programs will be implemented by 2007.

Palmetto STARS for childcare centers and 4-K programs will be implemented in fall 2005. Unless otherwise noted, the term “center” in this paper will apply to both childcare centers and 4-K programs. The Palmetto STARS Office (Office) will be responsible for the administration of the Palmetto STARS system. It will be located in the SC Department of Social Services (DSS) with specific responsibilities for administration of Palmetto STARS for licensed childcare centers. The State Department of Education (SDE) will work in collaboration with the central Palmetto STARS Office at DSS, reporting to it on its work with 4-K programs.

A Palmetto STARS website housed at the Office of Research and Statistics (ORS) will handle a number of functions associated with Palmetto STARS: information to providers and the public; application, self-assessment and annual update forms for centers; generation of reports; and database for research. The website will present a seamless childcare and early education system to the public and will be completed prior to implementation of Palmetto STARS. A Palmetto STARS website at SCDSS will be functioning by late 2004. Its purpose will be informational.

The groundwork and support for Palmetto STARS is the result of a remarkable 16-month study initiated by the ABC Child Care Program, SC Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with the co-directors of the *Universal Financing of Early Care and Education for America's Children* project, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Ed.D. and Richard N. Brandon, Ph.D. During the development of Palmetto STARS, the ABC Program was transferred to the SC Department of Social Services (SCDSS). SCDSS has put its substantial support behind the development of the new system. Thirty-two South Carolina organizations formed the Task Force on the Quality of Early Care and Education, which carried out the study. It worked diligently from February 2002 through May 2003 to design and estimate the costs of a quality early care and education system for South Carolina.

The Task Force recognized the desirability of the quality-rating concept as a vehicle through which its recommendations could be implemented. Subsequently, the ABC Child Care Program staff organized a core group of leaders from the Task Force to develop a quality rating system for licensed childcare centers and 4-year old kindergarten programs. The core group, the Palmetto STARS Matrix Committee, includes representatives from the State Department of Education, the State Department of Social

Services, the Head Start Directors group and the Head Start Collaboration Office. Two consultants were hired to guide the process, bringing knowledge of the state and a national perspective.

The timeline, below, illustrates the timeframe for implementation of Palmetto STARS.

2/02	5/03	10/03	8/04	9-11/04	spring 05	Fall 05
Task Force Palmetto STARS Pilot begins	Task Force formed begins recommendations	Palmetto STARS finalized	Palmetto STARS planning began	Palmetto STARS Committee finalized draft	Palmetto Committee seeks feedback	STARS

Materials summarizing Palmetto STARS are being circulated to a broader group for review. It includes the Task Force on the Quality of Early Care and Education; Good Start, Grow Smart; Child Care Coordinating Council; the SC School-Age Alliance and three statewide associations: SC Association on the Education of Young Children (SCAEYC), SC Child Care Association (SCCCA), and SC Early Childhood Association (SCECA). Their comments will be considered by the Palmetto STARS Matrix Committee and incorporated into Palmetto STARS as appropriate. A field test will be implemented and further revisions will be made based upon an evaluation of the field test.

Palmetto STARS begins with the premise that quality enhancement is not only desirable and feasible but requires an integrated system. The system has two major components: first, it is made up of a matrix that specifies five tiers or quality levels, with each tier specifying criteria that a child care center or 4-K program must meet (Appendix A). Each tier is associated with a progressively greater number of stars. The first tier, the baseline, requires compliance with SCDSS regulations for licensed child care centers. Three middle tiers have been developed or adapted through a highly deliberative and collaborative process. Level 2 criteria are similar to current ABC Level 2 standards; Level 3 criteria are substantial upgrades to quality of staff and program; and Level 4 criteria incorporate the standards of public 4-K programs and similar standards for centers serving children age birth to five. The fifth tier, the apex, embraces the accreditation criteria of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Additional criteria have been added to the NAEYC standards by the Palmetto STARS Matrix Committee.